

## **Canadian Center for Women's Empowerment (CCFWE)**

Meseret Haileyesus, Executive Director

HOUSE OF COMMONS STATUS OF WOMEN Meeting of March 4th [WATCH BROADCAST](#)

### **Ms. Meseret Haileyesus:**

Good afternoon everyone.

My name is Meseret Haileyesus, executive director of the Canadian Center for Women's Empowerment.

I join you from the unceded, unsundered territory of the Anishinabe Algonquin nation in Ottawa. I am very honoured and pleased to join the committee this afternoon. Thank you so much for the invitation.

The Canadian Center for Women's Empowerment is the only national non-profit organization dedicated to addressing economic abuse through advocacy, education, economic empowerment and policy change. Our work is informed by up-to-date evidence and lived experience. To create systemic change, we have convened a national task force for women's economic justice. The task force is nationally represented by policy-makers, social service staff, financial institutions and community organizations advocating for policies to aid economic abuse victims.

From this task force, we have heard financial institution staff tell us that they can be the first line of defence for victims. They've told us that their clients open up to them with personal stories. Thus, they can see the first red flags of domestic violence abuse before police, shelters or lawyers are notified. However, financial institutions are missing policies and tools to be able to escalate abuse victims' files and help the victims. Financial institutions have shown their dedication to using innovative tools in combatting elder financial abuse such as flagging and escalating cases. We encourage them to replicate that process for domestic economic abuse survivors as well.

Economic abuse impacts 95% to 99% of domestic violence survivors. Economic abuse is under-reported and a hidden form of abuse often accompanied by physical, sexual and other forms of violence. Women from marginalized groups, including newcomers, refugees and racialized and indigenous women are at a higher risk of economic abuse due to systemic factors. The economic instability caused by this abuse is the top reason women cannot leave abusive relationships and the reason they often

go back to the abusive relationship after separation. Survivors struggle to rebuild their lives after abusers have damaged their financial standing because abusers will take out credit card loans in the victim's name and steal and spend their money.

Last year, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the CCFWE conducted a national study on economic abuse in the national capital region. Our study showed that 80% to 95% of participants said that abusers engaged in actions like stealing their money or credit cards, spending their rent money, building up debt in the victim's name and threatening them if they tried to go to work. Twenty-eight per cent of women wanted to leave their partners during COVID-19 but were unable to, and 10% had left and returned due to financial constraints. Out of the list of service providers, participants also ranked financial institutions as the least helpful to them during COVID-19.

We thank the federal government for the recent initiatives in fighting gender-based violence. However, there is considerable work to be done. Our financial and legal systems are not set up to support victims, and acknowledging economic abuse as a form of domestic violence is very critical.

I would like to recommend the federal government to take the following actions to create meaningful change: Amend the federal Divorce Act, the Civil Marriage Act and the Criminal Code to include all forms of economic abuse—which are economic control, economic exploitation and employment sabotage—in the definition of economic violence, and remove delays in granting separation. Develop a financial abuse code of conduct for financial institutions like the United Kingdom has. Amend the Bankruptcy and Insolvency Act to support economic abuse survivors. Enhance trauma-informed policies, financial codes of practice and procedures for private stakeholders such as housing, telecommunications, public transport, insurance, electric utilities, credit associations, banks and other stakeholders. Provide funding to develop educational materials. Provide funding to increase the research capacity of organizations studying economic abuse. Revise the metrics to collect economic and financial data through Statistics Canada.

Once again, I would like to thank the committee members for their interest in this important topic and, most importantly, for their leadership in bringing this conversation into public hearings.

I would be very happy to answer your questions.

Thank you so much.

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**The Chair:**

Thank you so much.